DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 001 CS 206 558

AUTHOR Quantic, Diane Dufva
TITLE Developing a Cooperative Library Skills Program.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English (10th, Laramie, WY, July 6-10, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; Cooperative Programs; Higher Education; *Library Instruction; *Library Skills; Program Descriptions; *Research Skills; *Student Research; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Library Procedures; *Research Papers (Students)

ABSTRACT

The goals and objectives of a college library instruction program should be developed jointly by library staff and composition faculty. Such a program should (1) attempt to overcome student insecurity and confusion about conducting research; (2) focus on tools and skills necessary at each university level; (3) emphasize the unique aspects of the research process, including the use and evaluation of sources and problem solving strategies; and (4) emphasize the process rather than the product. Many of these "housekeeping" areas can be taught in only one or two class periods or through a reading assignment. A guided tour or exercises in an instruction booklet or on computers or video tapes can acquaint students with the organization of the library. Composition teachers should both offer to help librarians develop materials on the writing process to accompany their library use instruction and devise ways to keep the skills needed to write a final paper methodical and minimal. Classroom time would be more productive if teachers emphasized problem solving strategies. Finally, librarians can provide students with knowledge about information roadblocks that composition teachers cannot provide because they do not know all the tools and skills of library research. (HTH)

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DEVELOPING A COOPERATIVE LIBRARY SKILLS PROGRAM

by

Diane Dufva Quantic

Department of English

Wichita State University

Wichita, Kansas 67208

Presented at

The Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English

July 9, 1981

Laramie, Wyoming

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DEVELOPING A COOPERATIVE LIBRARY SKILLS PROGRAM

If we were to ask a typical roomful of college composition teachers how many of them could use the Social Sciences Citation Index, find an item in government documents, list three engineering periodicals, do a med-line search or use the Library of Congress Subject Headings Index, I doubt that more than one or two could show confidence in all of these tasks. And yet, these are only the most basic kinds of tools that information researchers use today. If our students have problems with these tools, few of us can be of much help, and when they face other frustrations--references that they cannot find, journals that the library doesn't have, theses they can find no support for, information they cannot seem to make into a meaningful paper, often we still are not able to help.

The United States is becoming an "information culture" and the technology available to researchers is expanding more rapidly than we can imagine. Although we are discovering more and more about how we write--how we convey information--most composition instructors are still woefully ignorant about how we process this explosion of information in writing "research papers." If we send a student to the library, to "do" a research paper on a literary topic, both his research process and his finished product will be of little use to him in any other course or in his job. When we sit complacently in our offices, waiting for erudite papers to be turned in, we are often shocked and disappointed in the results, but just as often, we don't know what went wrong. So, we limit research to topics we know about (usually literature) and send a hoard of freshmen to research a narrow topic, so that resources disappear, students take their frustration out on the poor reference librarian on duty, and "research" is abandoned at the library's request. Such a train of events is inexcusable, but not rare. Librarians should

be impatient with composition instructors who regard the library as a babysitting service and who tolerate papers that are merely exercises in using the copying machine.

Most of us who teach composition were trained to teach literature, and even if we come from the few schools that offer training in rhetoric, our knowledge of the inner workings of the library is still roughly equivalent to our knowledge of western Botswana. Most people trained in the humanities live in the Neanderthal Age of information acquisition. We know PMLA and we can follow footnote clues. Therefore, we need the expertise of trained reference librarians in order to teach the research writing process adequately because to teach that process adequately, we must go beyond the chapter on "the research paper" in the composition texts.

The problems that plague library research come from a number of sources. Libraries themselves have problems: at the same time that technology is expanding and machines can do wonderful things, support from state and federal sources is shrinking and resources suffer accordingly. Wichita State, for example, recently had to cut journal acquisitions by ten percent. Students, of course, perceive all kinds of problems when they are faced with library research. They lack knowledge of the tools available to them beyond the card catalog and the Reader's Guide . . . Students certainly lack research skills beyond a cursory look at the card catalog and a periodical index or two. They rarely think about the adequacy or reliability of the sources that they do manage to find, and they are often confused about the entire process of finding information in a large library.

Even the composition faculty contributes to the problem. Too often, we emphasize form--footnotes, documentation format, etc. We are apt to assume that

the research process is similar to other writing processes, or that if students are trained in invention, rhetorical structures or other writing processes, it is not necessary to "teach" students a research process.

Obviously, if the problem comes from all of these sources--libraries, students, and teachers--then it is important to involve librarians and writing teachers, as well as other faculty and the students, too, in improving this teaching process.

Therefore, the goals and objectives of any program in library instruction should be developed jointly by library staff, composition faculty and other faculty who are interested. Ideally, library instruction should be incorporated into courses at all university levels. At a minimum, the program should:

1. attempt to overcome student insecurity and confusion about conducting research. This means helping students with each step in the research process, and recognizing the various "paths" that can lead to finding and using resources.
2. focus on necessary tools and skills at each university level. For example, freshmen might not need to know how to use a citation index, but they might need some acquaintance with government documents. Library faculty and composition instructors, with help from other faculty, can develop a taxonomy of library skills.
3. emphasize the unique aspects of the research process. This includes the use and evaluation of sources and problem-solving strategies. What should a student do, for example, when she finds no material on her chosen subject? or when she finds her original thesis unworkable because the information she finds does not support her original idea? How does

a student determine when a source is reliable and when she has collected enough material?

4. emphasis on the process rather than the product. Although form is important, it should not dominate library instruction.

Library research involves four areas of expertise: library tools, such as periodical indexes and card catalogs; skills such as the ability to take notes and accurately document these in a paper; the writing process itself, with the attending blocks that information from research sources adds; and research procedures such as the order in which material can be collected, alternative plans when original plans go awry or information cannot be found. All of these areas must be mastered if the student is to write a good paper, but some of these concerns are frankly boring, and unfortunately they are the ones that composition teachers and librarians have usually emphasized: how to use the card catalog; how to write a note card (people in text books have such neat handwriting!); how to type a footnote. Students who can read can learn this material even without any classroom instruction. Usually, these "housekeeping" details can be taken care of in one or two class sessions. Students who are intimidated by these procedures need individual help.

Rather, all of these areas should be unified in a cooperative library program. With the help of librarians, their tools can be kept at a minimum, once agreement has been reached about the appropriate tools for students at each level. An hour or two of in-class instruction, or some self-instruction can give students an overview of the library's organization, the card catalog and its filing rules, the organization of the periodical indexes and perhaps a word or two about the Subject Headings Index and government documents. A tour, organized by

the librarians, self-guided or in a group, can acquaint students with the organization of that intimidating building. Exercises in an instruction booklet or on computers or video tapes are possibilities on most campuses. At Wichita State, we use all of these: first semester, we use a booklet, with some review exercises, two hours of classroom instruction by the library reference staff, a self-guided tour and a short objective exam. This uses three hours of class time. Most teachers follow this with a very short library assignment. Second semester, when the emphasis is on argument and research rather than on rhetorical skills, teachers can use a short video tape on proper (and improper) library research procedures.

Librarians are developing other technology as well, such as point of use instruction aids. For example, a complicated index might have sitting next to it a computer or video machine that a student can turn to for instruction in use of that tool. There are a number of sophisticated subject search devices available. Librarians are often more than willing to develop short library assignments for classroom use that will give students practice beyond passive classroom lecture or the booklet instructions. For example, a librarian at Wichita State developed an exercise on New York murders, a list of forty-six grizzly doings since 1872 that introduces students to the use of microfilm readers and requires them to search a specific topic over a period of time in the New York Times Index. Other librarians have written short assignments on finding and documenting sources, using periodical indexes, and doing a subject search. And, of course, reference librarians in most libraries are busy giving intensive instruction in specific areas to advanced classes, returning students, entering freshmen, and even The Public. Composition teachers could reciprocate by offering to help librarians develop meaterials on the writing process to accompany their instruction in library use.

If we are going to explore ways to present library tools in a minimum of classroom time, then we should also explore ways that we can keep the skills needed to write the final paper methodical and and minimal as well. On the first research paper that students undertake, the instructor can devise step-by-step instruction, beginning with a subject search in the card catalog and periodical indexes, using worksheets to check for knowledge of the process and accuracy in recording information. If the instructor assumes that students can perform these elementary tasks, and does not ask for some kind of "report" very early, the final products are apt to be disasters. Then, a quick look at rough drafts and note cards can assure the instructor that the search process is progressing satisfactorily. In class and in the library, the emphasis should be on the process of gathering information, and on <u>why</u> methodical procedures are necessary, rather than on the form of these procedures themselves. For example, I ask students to tell me in writing which resource they found most helpful, and what information they wanted to use but couldn't find at different points in the writing process, so that I will know what frustrations they are facing, what successes they have had, and so that they will think about these aspects of the process. Perhaps the instructors and librarians could devise some exercises for students who are "stumped" at key points in the process; road maps, or strategies to use in the library. For example, librarians should be able to suggest some strategies when a journal article is missing.

Librarians and composition instructors should go beyond these forms, skills and tools to consider the nature of the material that students are collecting. Too often, students assume that a mindless collection of material will result in an acceptable paper, and too often this assumption is correct. Rather, as

students are involved in the research process, journals, short essays, or exercise sheets could prod them to consider the reliability and the adequacy of the sources they are using. For example, what's the latest information on this topic? how and where can you find it? is it accurate? are your sure? What's your oldest reference and your latest? do they agree? do they use the same sources for their information? These questions imply some emphasis in the classroom on careful reasoning and critical reading. Texts, workbooks, and the teacher's own ingenuity can provide exercises that reinforce library research by asking students to paraphrase, summarize and read for meaning so that the students feel comfortable making judgments about the books and articles they find. Too often, students assume that if the information is in the library, it must be true. Intimidation should be replaced by a little healthy skepticism--the result of careful reading.

Classroom time would be more productive if we went beyond the "housekeeping details" of library papers and spent time on problem solving strategies in the writing process as they relate specifically to finding information. What should a student do, for instance, if information isn't "coming in" at all? Is there no information on the subject, or is the student looking in the wrong places for references? What should the student do if the material he does find doesn't fall together, if no thesis comes from the material, or if findings disprove the hypothesis? Students worry about changing an opinion, as if they would be cheating themselves or the teacher. What should a student do if the idea he wanted to explore seems inadequate or absent? Students worry when they can't find exactly what they wanted to find, and they worry if they don't know what they are looking for. For example, a student who wanted to research electric cars discovered that most of the designs were hidden under wraps by the auto

makers' research divisions. A student researching homeopathic medicine knew before he started what he wanted to find, and was only frustrated when he couldn't find facts to support his bias. A student who chose "civil rights for the handicapped" never did finish her paper because she never discovered what her own opinion about the subject was.

These are the hard problems that students face when we assign research papers, and yet we rarely address these concerns adequately. The reasons are quite obvious. First of all, each student's approach and problem is unique; trying to anticipate these before students begin doing research and "teaching" students how to avoid each and every one would be almost impossible. Then, when students come to us with these library research problems, we are often unable to answer the questions because we don't know enough about these library tools and skills and the research process ourselves. And, until recently, we have known little about any writing process, and even now that the research and text emphasis is on the process and not on the product, few researchers have considered the complex issue of dealing with the writing process and the information gathering process at once. Nevertheless, the focus on the writing process--especially on finding a topic--should help students approach the dreaded library assignment with a better notion of their own interests, which should in turn help them evaluate material once they find it. Again, essays, journals, personal conferences, and working with students and librarians in the library should help them overcome these barriers.

Finally, again, we must turn to the librarians. They can provide students with insights about information roadblocks that we cannot provide because we do not know all the tools and skills of library research. Although some students consult librarians, many do not. We must not assume that the old advice "ask a

librarian" is adequate. Co-reading of essays and journals on the research and writing process could provide the student with help from two different experts. Perhaps the final paper should be read and evaluated by the instructor and a librarian. At Wichita State, we have had a librarian evaluate the students' bibliographies and a questionnaire that they completed about their problems and successes in library research.

The process of gathering and using information from other sources is too complex to leave to any one discipline. Ideally, training students in this important skill should be the province of every teacher and librarian. A starting point would be to develop presentations, instructional booklets and video tapes, exercises, problem-solving strategies, and evaluation procedures cooperatively.

SOME HELPFUL BOOKS:

Bazerman, Charles. The Careful Writer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

This text focuses on the careful reading and evaluation of sources. Assignments begin with short tasks (for example, compare two periodical articles) and build on these into longer research assignments.

Coyle, William. Research Papers. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, fifth edition.

A step-by-step guide to research and writing papers. Excellent exercises for each step in the process.

Flower, Linda. Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

This text, drawing from cognitive psychology, emphasizes ways to generate ideas, focus these ideas, and overcome roadblocks in the writing process. Easily adapted to research writing processes.

Wichita State University Library Reference Staff. Using the Library.

The instruction book includes some self-instruction exercises. Send for these, and we will include a packet of short library assignments developed for our WSU librarians.